Constructing a theory of learner autonomy: some steps along the way

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Introduction

In this article I describe some key stages in the journey that has led me to my present theoretical view of learner autonomy. My first engagement with the concept of learner autonomy, at the end of the 1970s, was prompted by the responsibility I acquired at that time for developing and administering self-access language learning facilities for university students. These circumstances made it all too easy to assume that learner autonomy was the same thing as self-instruction. What I now recognize as genuine understanding began to dawn in the mid 1980s, as I sought an explanation for the astonishing success of a Danish classroom experiment in learner autonomy. In time I was led to the idea that learner autonomy is a special case of a universal human capacity that is part of the complex dynamic behind developmental learning. By the late 1990s the application of this idea to language pedagogy enabled me to formulate three principles that I believe govern not only the development of learner autonomy in the foreign language classroom but also the achievement of optimal language learning success. In the concluding section of the article I briefly consider the implications of my present theoretical position for teacher education and (where it all started) self-access language learning.

A faltering start: self-access language learning and learner autonomy

In 1978 Trinity College Dublin established a Centre for Language and Communication Studies as an academic development associated with the commissioning of its new Arts and Social Sciences Building. The idea was that CLCS should assume responsibility for

the language laboratories that in those days were the chief technical support for language learning. In due course it was also to develop a teaching role in theoretical and applied linguistics, phonetics and speech science, and research was to mediate between its service and teaching functions. But the first task was to organize the language laboratories in such a way that the College and its students could derive maximum value from them.

The language laboratory began life, of course, as the electronic embodiment of audio-lingual drill and practice: listen carefully to a model transformation – for example, from the present to the past tense; then listen to a cue, record your attempt at the same transformation, listen to the pre-recorded correct answer, repeat the correct answer; and then, after working through perhaps a dozen such items, listen to the recording of the whole drill, correcting your mistakes. In the earliest days of the language laboratory, the aura of science conferred by the word "laboratory" led some teachers to don white coats before putting their students through drill and practice. But in truth the language laboratory reduced the teacher's pedagogical role to vanishing point: its most efficient use was as a tool of self-instruction. Apart from drills of various kinds whose structure embodied a powerful teacher role, the language laboratory could deliver endless listening practice; but this too was something that did not require the presence of a teacher. In schools the teacher might still have a disciplinary role to play, but in universities the language laboratory offered itself as a place where students could work on their own to improve their pronunciation and intonation, grammatical and lexical fluency, and understanding of the spoken word.

In Trinity College Dublin the different language departments – French, German, Irish, Italian, Russian, Spanish – organized their own language laboratory classes using materials they had bought or made for themselves. It was not part of CLCS's role to interfere with these classes in any way. Instead we must exploit the full potential of the language laboratories by setting them up not only for class teaching but as a sort of interactive library dedicated to language learning. It was clear enough, after all, that students needed more than their weekly translation classes if they were to achieve appropriate levels of communicative proficiency in the language(s) they were learning. Over many months we copied all our master tapes on to audiocassettes, which were then made available to students in a self-access library. This service was widely advertised, not only to language students but to members of the College in general.

It was only after we had developed this self-access dimension to our language laboratories that I became aware of the concept of learner autonomy. In 1979 the Council of Europe published Henri Holec's report *Autonomy and foreign language learning* (cited here as Holec 1981), whose arguments derived in particular from theories of adult education that stressed the importance of learner self-management. Holec's definition of learner autonomy described perfectly the skills I imagined the university language learner should possess:

> To take charge of one's learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.:
> - determining the objectives;
> - defining the contents and progressions;
> - selecting methods and techniques to be used;

- monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.);
- evaluating what has been acquired. (Holec 1981, 3)

Our self-access facilities faced three problems, however. First, students did not come in very great numbers. Secondly, those who did come rarely seemed to know how to learn on their own. And thirdly, the kind of materials we were able to offer them were usually designed on the assumption that the language laboratory was a substitute teacher; in other words, they left little if any room for the exercise of learner initiative.

A research grant allowed us to respond to these three problems by setting up an experimental self-access language learning programme, in German for engineering students, and monitoring its progress over two academic years (1982—84). The programme was extra-curricular and participation was voluntary. The core learning materials were the various components of the *BBC German Kit* (Sprankling 1979), a self-instructional package in print and audio derived from the BBC's television and radio course *Kontakte*. In addition we provided pedagogical and authentic materials relevant to various aspects of engineering. Most importantly, we set up an advisory service designed to help students to determine their objectives, define contents and progressions, select methods and techniques, monitor progress, and evaluate outcomes (Little and Grant 1984, 1986). Students enrolled for this programme at two levels, beginner and intermediate. The beginners mostly worked only with the *BBC German Kit*, while the intermediate learners also focused on German for specific (engineering) purposes.

Of the 106 students who originally enrolled, nine completed the two-year programme. In the final assessment all of them showed that they had learned a lot of German and were able to put it to communicative use. We were left, nevertheless, with four unresolved questions. First, to what extent had our engineering students really become autonomous learners, rather than assiduous followers of the successive stages of the *BBC German Kit* and other pedagogical materials we had provided them with? Secondly, given the ineluctably dialogic nature of oral communication, to what extent is it possible to learn – rather than simply practise elements of – oral proficiency on one's own? Thirdly, how exactly do we learn second languages anyway? And fourthly, given that most students came to us with little or no idea how to use self-access facilities, how could we develop their autonomy as learners? At this point our research funding ran out, but these four questions followed me into other areas of pedagogical development and reflection.

The example of Leni Dam

From the second half of the 1970s most talk in language teaching circles was of the so-called "communicative approach". In Ireland our understanding of the paradigm shift that this signalled was shaped largely by the Council of Europe's *Threshold Level* (van Ek 1975), *Un Niveau Seuil* (Coste et al. 1976), and *Kontaktschwelle* (Baldegger et al. 1980). These documents and the thinking behind them inspired a group of secondary and university language teachers to set up a project to promote reform of the official curricula and develop communicative teaching materials. Institiúid Teangeolaíochta Éireann gave us a home as the I.T.É. Modern Languages Project, and we developed an outline syllabus based on the *Threshold Level* and a best-selling French course called *Salut!*, for lower

secondary learners. Like our peers in most other western European countries, we were utterly persuaded of the need for a communicative revolution in language teaching. But I for one was not altogether clear how to achieve the revolution in pedagogical terms. I knew, of course, that teaching learners grammatical rules was no guarantee that they would be able to apply those rules accurately and consistently in spontaneous communication. But I also suspected that teaching them functions and notions was no more likely to be successful, which left me very uncertain how exactly second languages should be taught.

The commercial success of *Salut!* allowed us to bring language teaching experts from other countries to share their experience and insights with us. Thus it was that in 1984 I first became aware of the pioneering efforts of Leni Dam, who was teaching English to mixed-ability classes in a middle school just outside Copenhagen. Dam's key text was Douglas Barnes's book *From communication to curriculum* (1976), which had already achieved classic status. Barnes was concerned not with language teaching but with schooling in general, and especially with the alienation of too many learners from the pedagogical process. He expressed that alienation in terms of a contrast between what he called "school knowledge" and "action knowledge":

> School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it in our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated into that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become "action knowledge". (Barnes 1976, 81)

As Leni Dam saw it, her role was to bring her learners to the point where proficiency in English – reading and writing as well as listening and speaking – was part of their "action knowledge", and she saw the development of learner autonomy as essential to her success. The videos she showed us made plain that even after one year her learners could communicate in English. Some did so with greater accuracy, lexical range and fluency than others, but all of them were *users* of English within the English-speaking community of the classroom. How did she do it? Six things seemed to be fundamental to her pedagogical approach: (i) from the beginning she used nothing but the target language in the classroom, and required the same of her learners (inevitably, in the very early stages their interlanguage bore powerful, sometimes overwhelming traces of Danish); (ii) she involved her learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which were shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class; (iii) she required her learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, and these too were subjected to discussion, analysis and evaluation; (iv) although her learners were required to identify individual goals, they mostly pursued these via collaborative work in small groups; (v) all her learners were obliged to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves pro-

duced; (vi) she engaged her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class. (For a full account of Leni Dam's classroom practice, see Dam 1995.)

This first encounter with Leni Dam led me to revise four of my key beliefs. First, there was no doubt that her learners were autonomous, in control of their own learning, so I had to recognize that learner autonomy could exist in other learning contexts besides adult education and university self-access centres. Secondly, whereas I had previously understood learner autonomy as a capacity of the individual learner to work alone, it was clear that Leni Dam's learners developed their learning as well as their language skills in interaction with one another: for them, learner autonomy involved collaboration. Thirdly, whereas I had previously assumed that learner autonomy was an optional extra, Leni Dam's example showed that autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are two sides of the same coin: you simply cannot have one without the other. Fourthly, Leni Dam's learners were clearly able to communicate in their target language, yet they often chose learning activities that seemed old-fashioned and not specially communicative (for example, translating Danish fairy tales into English): I had to recognize that the communicative approach is nothing if it does not seek to teach language *through* (and not just *for*) communication.

This revision of key beliefs was not immediate, of course; it took place gradually over several years. It seemed to offer at least the beginning of an answer to the question, How should second languages be taught? It suggested a disturbingly sceptical answer to the question, To what extent is it possible to learn oral proficiency in a second language on one's own? But it also gave rise to a third question: If learner autonomy is about turning "school knowledge" into "action knowledge", must it not be available, at least in principle, to all learners? This led me to a consideration of developmental learning, which is where all of us first acquire "action knowledge".

Lessons from child development and first language acquisition

As a parent of some years' standing I knew that from birth children are autonomous in the sense that they have a will of their own: we cannot dictate their thoughts or their intentions. I also knew that children are autonomous in the (no doubt related) sense that they develop in interaction with their environment but according to a genetic inheritance and biological programme that the environment cannot alter. I never ceased to be amazed by the differences between my four daughters, nor by the way in which each of them spontaneously and involuntarily produced behaviours that vividly recalled other family members not necessarily known to them. At the same time, however, I knew that my daughters' development had been stimulated and sustained by the interactive processes of family life. And I knew that successive developmental stages were marked by an increased capacity for autonomous behaviour of all kinds. But what was the relation between the autonomy that is a biologically determined human characteristic and capacity and learner autonomy in formal educational contexts?

In the late 1980s the ideas of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky came to prominence in developmental and educational psychology. Here I found a model of child development that made sense of my own experience as a parent but also suggested ways of establishing

connections between the largely unconscious acquisition of "action knowledge" and the always conscious mediation of "school knowledge". For present purposes I shall focus briefly on just three related lines of argument.

First, for Vygotsky the child's development is above all a matter of becoming a fully functioning (in my terms, autonomous) member of a particular human culture. Social interaction plays a decisive role in this process, providing structures that are gradually internalized as cognitive capacities:

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an inter-psychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. […] Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (Vygotsky 1981, 63)

How we learn to think, in other words, is determined by the interactive structures in which our early experience is embedded. This deceptively simple argument helps to explain the co-existence in humanity of biological unity and cultural diversity; it also implies that in order to be optimal *all* human learning may require a social dimension; and it clearly relates our psychological autonomy to the interdependent processes of social interaction.

The second line of argument I want to refer to addresses the question, By what process are functions internalised from the social to the psychological plane? Vygotsky's (1986) answer was to distinguish three forms of speech that together mediate between social interaction and individual cognition. First comes *social speech*, conversation with others, which accompanies, guides and supports so much of human behaviour. Next comes *egocentric speech*, which has its origins in social speech but takes on a private cognitive function: talking to oneself in order, for example, to structure the otherwise unsupported performance of a task. Finally, *inner speech* evolves from egocentric speech and at the deepest level loses its formal properties and condenses into "pure meaning". This argument reinforces the implication that all human learning may require a social dimension, especially when the object of learning is a language; and it shows how our psychological autonomy derives from social interdependence. It thus provides a general theoretical justification for the central role that Leni Dam assigns to group work conducted in the target language. By talking English the whole time her learners gradually become able to think in English, which is fundamental to their developing autonomy as learners and users of the language.

The third line of argument concerns the zone of proximal development, a concept that Vygotsky developed in order to explore the relation between development as a spontaneously occurring phenomenon and learning as the product of pedagogy. He defined the zone of proximal development as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky 1978, 86). This definition implies four things about learning. First, new knowledge and skills can only ever be acquired on the basis of what we already know and can do; secondly, learning is the result of supported task performance ("under

adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers"); thirdly, autonomy ("independent problem solving") is the goal of all learning, formal as well as informal; and fourthly, in any extended process of learning, the autonomy that we achieve at one stage provides an essential springboard to the next.

Although Vygotsky's arguments are concerned with learning in general, they carry powerful implications for the way in which we should organize language learning in formal educational environments. It is thus hardly surprising that accounts of first language acquisition grounded in a similar view of the interdependence of social-interactive and individual-cognitive processes also carry implications for second and foreign language teaching. For example, Halliday (1975, 140) describes first language acquisition as follows:

> In learning a language the child's task is to construct the system of meanings that represents his own model of social reality. This process takes place inside his own head; it is a cognitive process. But it takes place in contexts of social interaction, and there is no way it can take place except in these contexts. As well as being a cognitive process, the learning of the mother tongue is also an interactive process […]. The social context is therefore not so much an external condition of the learning of meanings as a generator of the meanings that are learnt.

The same considerations apply to Leni Dam's classroom. Her learners gradually construct a system of meanings that represents their own model of social reality as represented by their English-speaking classroom; and for them too the process is both cognitive and social-interactive, and the social context is a generator of the meanings that are learnt.

Tomasello (1999, 109) has this to say about first language acquisition:

> To acquire a language the child must live in a world that has structured social activities she can understand […]. [T]his often involves the recurrence of the same general activity on a regular or routine basis so that they can come to discern how the activity works and how the various social roles in it function […]. In general, if a child were born into a world in which the same event never recurred, the same object never appeared twice, and adults never used the same language in the same context, it is difficult to see how that child […] could acquire a natural language.

Again the same considerations apply to Leni Dam's classroom. Her learners also live in a world that has structured social activities they can understand, and the recurrence of activities on a regular basis allows them to discern how the activities work and how the various social roles they embrace function.

A theory of learner autonomy: three pedagogical principles

Leni Dam showed me that the pursuit of learner autonomy facilitates the conversion of "school knowledge" into "action knowledge". By requiring her learners to set their own goals, select their own learning activities and evaluate learning outcomes, she gave them ownership of the learning process; and by insisting that all this must be done in the target language she ensured that autonomy in language learning could never be separated from autonomy in language use. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development and learning

explained the relation between collaboration and autonomy; while his concept of the zone of proximal development identified autonomy not only as the goal of all learning, whether developmental or formal, but as the basis on which we move from one stage of learning to the next. All of this confirmed that learner autonomy in formal educational contexts is a special case of the autonomy that is central to the involuntary processes of developmental learning; that it is thus in principle available to all learners; and that it is a hallmark of genuinely successful learning.

Towards the end of the 1990s I converted my theoretical understanding into three pedagogical principles (see, for example, Little 1999, 2001a). I believe them to be universally applicable to formal language learning, though their implementation must always be sensitive to context. The first principle concerns *learner empowerment*: requiring learners to assume responsibility for their own learning and (what amounts to the same thing) giving them control of the learning process. Learner empowerment is the result not of a single act on the teacher's part but of a continuous process. The amount of responsibility that learners can assume and the extent to which they can manage their own learning is always constrained by the amount of learning they have already done; and the amount of learning they have already done is a matter both of their proficiency in the target language and of their developed learning skills. The teacher's role is to initiate, support and direct the processes of negotiation that help learners at every stage to identify new learning goals, new learning activities and materials, and thus new areas of responsibility. Besides possessing the skills needed to sustain these processes, the teacher must be able to identify on a day-to-day basis when it is appropriate to leave her learners to get on with their learning. Note that, in accordance with Vygotskian theory, the individual learner's capacity to exercise responsibility for his or her learning at a psychological level develops out of the interactive (and thus linguistically mediated) experience of shared responsibility for collaborative learning projects.

The second principle concerns *learner reflection*: helping learners to think about their learning both at a macro level (for example, reviewing what has been achieved in a school year) and at a micro level (for example, trying to work out why a particular learning activity was or was not successful). To the extent that it is impossible to accept responsibility for anything without thinking about it, the principle of learner reflection is already implied by the principle of learner empowerment. But it acquires independent status by virtue of the key role played by self-assessment in the development of learner autonomy. It is not sufficient for learners to recognize that they are responsible for their own learning and to control the learning process by setting learning targets and choosing learning activities and materials. They must also be able to evaluate learning outcomes, identifying weaknesses as well as strengths in order to give the next phase of learning an appropriate focus. Like the principle of learner empowerment, the principle of learner reflection refers to a continuous process that the teacher must initiate, support and direct. Also like the principle of learner empowerment, the principle of learner reflection is implemented interactively: the individual learner's capacity to evaluate his or her learning grows out of the group's ongoing discussion of the learning process.

The third principle concerns *appropriate target language use*. This requires the teacher to manage classroom discourse in such a way that learners are able to use the target language for genuine communicative purposes from the very beginning. When she is talking

to her learners the teacher must scaffold their utterances much as parents scaffold the utterances of small children. This enables the learners to contribute to the construction of meaning that lies beyond the range of their current proficiency. When learners are working in groups they must engage in tasks that they can sustain in the target language. One of the reasons why Leni Dam's learners make such rapid progress is that their group work always involves collaborative writing – a translation, a story, a collection of poems, a sketch to be performed in front of the class. Once the first words have been agreed on, the text provides a basis for deciding what the next words should be; and the gradually expanding text can be used to support the learners' discussion of what is good or bad, right or wrong. If their collaboration is to be effective the learners must read and re-read the text aloud, which helps to develop pronunciation and intonation and promotes the internalization of linguistic forms. In this way writing supports speaking and speaking supports writing. (For a wide-ranging and practical discussion of ways in which the teacher can support and scaffold her learners' target language use, see Thomsen 2003.)

These three principles should be seen not as discrete components of a pedagogical toolkit, but rather as three perspectives on a process that is socially and psychologically complex but pedagogically quite straightforward. I noted above that the principle of learner reflection is already implied by the principle of learner empowerment. So too is the principle of appropriate target language use: in order to exercise responsibility for their learning, learners must have access to all the discourse roles that lie within the range of their proficiency. By the same token, the principle of appropriate target language use entails the principles of learner empowerment and learner reflection, and the principle of learner reflection entails the principles of learner empowerment and appropriate target language use.

Conclusion: implications of the theory for teacher education and self-access language learning

The talk that prompted this article was given at a conference of teacher educators, and I was first introduced to learner autonomy within the context of self-access language learning. It is thus appropriate to conclude by briefly considering the implications of my present theoretical position for language teacher education and the organization of self-access language learning.

In language teacher education I believe that we must do three things. First, we must give teachers an understanding of language learning as a process in which social-interactive and individual-cognitive dimensions are mutually dependent and mutually supportive. Secondly, we must help them to develop their classroom management skills in the target language, paying particular attention to scaffolding techniques and the initiation and management of negotiation. Thirdly, we must help them to develop their capacity to support the learning both of individuals and of the whole class in the short, medium and long term, which means teaching them how to plan, monitor and evaluate learning. It should go without saying that the pursuit of these goals should exploit exactly the same techniques and processes that we want our teachers to be able to deploy and support in their classrooms – negotiation, collaboration, group and individual reflection, scaffolding target language use, using writing to develop speaking, and so on. For if optimal learning

entails the development of learner autonomy, optimal teaching entails the development of teacher autonomy, understood as a process of never-ending growth driven by the same principles that govern learner autonomy.

As for self-access, I now view the concept of independent language learning (that is, language learning undertaken individually and without the support of a teacher) with a great deal of scepticism (see, for example, Little 2001b). It seems to me beyond serious dispute that the essentially dialogic nature of language and communication requires all language learning to be embedded in some kind of social-interactive learning framework (on the basis of arguments closely related to those I have developed in this article, Karlsson et al. [1997] explore some of the possibilities available to self-access language learning schemes). Of course, the fact that the language laboratory was a closed system imposed constraints that more recent technologies have removed. In particular, computer-mediated communication has opened up new possibilities for interactive learning in virtual learning spaces that accommodate virtual learning communities; for example, e-mail and MOOs (text-based virtual environments) can be used for tandem language learning at distance (see, for example, Little et al. 1999, Schwienhorst 1998). This brings not closure, however, but a new set of challenges; for computer-mediated communication is already changing patterns of language use, and this will have as yet unforeseeable consequences for the content and processes of language teaching and learning.

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